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Script: *The Five Myths of Academic Standards*

Paul Makeham, QUT

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### **Background:**

Current global interest in pushing the “Quality Agenda”: ***aligning and comparing systems and introducing standards***.

In Australia, the **Bradley Review**: basis for the Rudd Govt’s “Higher Education Revolution”. Two main aspects:

1. widening access and participation; and
2. strengthening the quality and accountability framework.

The gov’t wants to counter **community concerns** about falling standards by **tangibly demonstrating** the quality of Oz degrees. At the moment, it is largely an institution’s reputation that stands in lieu of this more rigorous system.

***“New regulatory environment”***

***“New educational architecture”***

***“Outcomes-based curriculum design”***

Establishment of **TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority)**. Its brief includes:

1. a national accreditation function for all providers, assuring standards for **provider** (incl private colleges etc), **degree** (quality / revised AQF) and **information** (informed choice); and
2. a new quality-assurance role, via the new Higher Education Standards Framework (TEQSA = “AUQA with teeth”)

(ERA will do the same for Research Excellence, via DEWA)

The **learning and teaching academic standards** project – a subset of the broader TEQSA agenda.

- many previous chapters in the Oz **history of academic standards** (AVCC Code of practice, 1987; Academic standards program in the 90s)
- also significant **international** work done and being done: eg EUs “Tuning” exercise as part of the Bologna Process, seeking to “harmonise” European degrees and learning outcomes.

- International **accreditation** of degrees (eg Business, Engineering) is also standard practice

***“Australia must demonstrate its commitment to the standards setting process and to benchmarking its standards internationally”.***

The HE sector must be more **transparent** and **accountable**; a new era of **regulation** and **monitoring** against agreed standards by an **external body**.

### **What academic standards are:**

Learning and teaching academic standards will be publicly defensible statements about academic standards in all disciplines.

An academic standard is a “big-picture concept that stands somewhat apart from particular assessment tasks and student responses. It describes: “How much, intellectually and professionally, students have learned or acquired by the time they complete their (HE) course.”

They will establish “**baseline expectations**” for ug and pg degrees.

They will test “equivalence between different degrees”. Students will have a better idea of how their work is measured and reported; employers will have greater confidence in the meaning of academic results.

They will comprise: National standards of desired academic achievement - the sector’s formal definition of Minimum levels / “**Thresholds**” of achievement:

***“Formal statements of academic standards by discipline, along with processes for applying those standards”.*** They will comprise “a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes”.

There will be implications for the T&L Performance Fund. Performance Indicators will dictate funding. (How will this work in practice?)

### **The process:**

ALTC is “**acting as a bridge**” for connecting stakeholders: councils of deans; discipline communities; professional, industry and accreditation bodies; and student groups.

The academic standards project is working with discipline scholars (etc) to “specify criteria, and measures of performance against those criteria, that will permit national and international cross-referencing within and between disciplines.

**The ALTC will not define or develop academic standards itself.** It is an opportunity for the academic community itself to develop standards and take responsibility for their implementation.

This is also an opportunity for “curriculum revitalization”.

Some disciplines (eg Health; Creative & Performing Arts) are working in a cross-disciplinary way to define what is critical in all their graduates regardless of sub-discipline. Others, eg Law, are pursuing it at the single (Bachelor) degree level. Business are working on Accounting, both Bachelor and coursework Masters.

Finished report due by mid-December 2010, outlining a framework for learning outcomes in each broad discipline.

### **Biggest Challenges:**

- ***“achieving buy-in from academics at all levels across our institutions”***
- perceptions / anxieties about **“standardisation”** ... that all degrees / curricula will have to be the same; that institutional and academic autonomy will be threatened. (This is also at odds with the other imperative coming out of Bradley for differentiation and diversity).
- (According to CEO, there will be ***“great scope for individualized approaches for course design, learning activities, teaching styles etc”***).
- ***“Harmonization and tuning, not standardisation”***.
- How is it possible to demonstrate the achievement of minimum learning outcomes? How are they tested?
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- How are minimum quality standards conveyed to (eg) the media, the community, in order to rebut the allegations of declining standards?
- “threshold standards” will lead to dumbing down, and a lowering of standards overall – a race to the bottom. (“By exceeding minimum national standards, we can demonstrate the distinctiveness of individual institutions....curriculum and teaching methods will not be defined nationally”).
- Minimum standards will conflict with other quality assurance mechanisms eg professional accreditation.
- Codification / quantification of qualitative learning outcomes and processes.
- The end justifies the means. With the standards agenda, it's all about the destination, not the journey.
- Slippery words: quality / standards / outcomes / achievement

## **Characters:**

### **Current Affairs Anchorwoman**

**Lydia Skidaway:** *Federal Minister for Education, Tourism, Racing and the Arts*

**Prof Viola Fraser AM:** *Chair, Universities Australia*

**Dr Chrissy Angel:** *Course Coordinator - Bachelor of Leisure, Recreation & Tourism, National University of Technology and Sciences (NUTS). Intense, slightly scary, Gen X “Gender Studies” type. Chrissy is enthusiastic about the standards initiative and its outcomes-orientation.*

**Dr Glen Affric:** *Senior Lecturer, Union Delegate, National Union of Tertiary Individuals. The standards agenda is all about performance-based funding and league tables.*

**Trevor Sykes:** *Vice-President, Australasian Association of Leisure, Recreation and Tourism (AALeRT). Glen doesn’t see the need to reinvent the wheel – his association has always worked closely with Unis to accredit courses using industry-based, internationally benchmarked standards.*

**A/Prof Roly Makepeace:** *Assistant Dean (T&L), Faculty of Professional Communication, NUTS. Roly is a thinker, but remains concerned about the whole initiative: “We should be testing academic achievement, but achievement isn’t the focus of the current standards debate. What we’re really talking about here is a whole set of TAFE-type competency standards. The problem is – you can’t write standards .... You have to start with the students’ work, and have structured, informed conversations about standards of achievement, based on the primary data.”*

## **INTRO: CURRENT AFFAIRS ANCHORWOMAN**

WELCOME BACK – FRESH FROM HER RECENT SUCCESS IN IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION LYDIA SKIDAWAY HAS TURNED HER ATTENTION TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY SECTOR, ANNOUNCING TODAY A NEW NATIONAL SYSTEM OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS. THIS HAS PROMPTED AN IMMEDIATE RESPONSE FROM THE NATIONAL UNION OF TERTIARY INDIVIDUALS – WHO’VE MADE IT CLEAR THEY HAVE LITTLE TIME FOR THE PROPOSAL.

## **CUT TO:**

**(CAPTION): Rt Hon Lydia Skidaway:** *Federal Minister for Education, Tourism, Racing and the Arts*

## **Lydia:**

[Are you ready for me? Is here fine? Good, good... come and get me!] It’s my pleasure to announce today the establishment of the Australian Schedule of Higher Education Threshold Standards (or ASHETS). This is the culmination of a labour of love for a veritable army of stakeholders in the academic community, the professions, and of course, Government. So why is ASHETS important? Because it demonstrates this Government’s commitment to the Higher Education Revolution. And because it demonstrates Australia’s commitment to benchmarking its standards internationally.

Academic standards provide us with a new educational architecture which will enable us in the H.E. sector to offer transparent measures for tangibly demonstrating the quality of Australian degrees.

I am the first to acknowledge that the new regulations environment presents us with a fresh set of challenges. Indeed, implementing the tertiary education quality agenda will be a colossal exercise.

***CUT TO:***

**(CAPTION): Prof Viola Fraser AM:** *Chair, Universities Australia*

Universities Australia is extremely keen to cooperate with Government on this matter. Indeed we regard the standards agenda as one of our key priorities, and we look forward to contributing to these important national objectives.

Having said that, we do have some concerns about the new regulatory environment. We need to guard against risks, like rival agendas and micro-regulation. Accordingly, we're keen to work with the ALTC, AUQA, TEQSA, HEAC, VET, AQF - and of course DEEWR and DIISR – and any other TLA - to address these matters.

***CUT TO:***

**(CAPTION): Dr Chrissy Angel:** *Course Coordinator - Bachelor of Leisure, Recreation & Tourism, National University of Technology and Sciences (NUTS). Intense, slightly scary.*

I'm all for it. I actually think academic standards are way overdue. I mean, I'm an empiricist - y'know? - that's my academic thing, so I'm fully interested in evidence, and outputs, and to me, that's what *I'm* talking about. Y'know, evidence of quality –

yeah – and academic standards that actually mean something, like, they're explicit ... and measurable ... and internationally benchmarked. Students wanna know what are the explicit outcomes of their learning. And how their work is measured? And how are their results are reported? And employers, too - they need to know what those results actually mean. Yeah? So bring it on - I think it's a good thing. And it's a great opportunity to revitalise the curriculum too. You know – start at the end and work backwards ....

***CUT BACK TO:***

**Lydia:**

But I am equally confident that a renewed commitment to outcomes-based curriculum design will place Australia at the leading edge of international best practice and align us with overseas initiatives, most particularly the EU's 'tuning' exercise.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for their efforts in leading this Standards project. In particular, I acknowledge the open, consultative manner in which stake-holders from across the sector have contributed to this work, whether it be Councils of Deans, professional associations, discipline scholars, or student groups – everybody had a chance to put in their 2 cents worth!

**REPORTER:**

Minister Skidaway, aren't Standards just another name for standardisation? Won't all degrees end up looking the same?



**Lydia:**

Let me be clear on this. What I have said, and I repeat, this is an exercise in harmonisation and tuning, not standardisation. Naturally, institutions will still have great scope for individualised approaches to course design, learning outcomes, teaching styles and so on.

**CUT TO:**

**(CAPTION): Dr Glen Affric:** *Senior Lecturer, Union Delegate, National Union of Tertiary Individuals (NUTI)*

I don't know why you want to know what I think... no-one's wanted to hear what I've had to say for years... and they're not going to start now, I shouldn't think. But I'll tell you something for nothing... The union is preparing a campaign, and we will fight this in the industrial court. This isn't about standards, this is about jobs. My job actually. This is about getting rid of people like me. Because we're too old, you see? We're out of step with the New Managerialism. Forget what we know! Forget what we've done! Forget the 1000 bloody years of academic tradition. No, what we need is NAPLAN for universities. *graduate standards ... quality-assured learning outcomes ...* Smoke and mirrors for league tables and Performance-based funding. Play the game, or we'll shut you down. Take away your accreditation. *(Drinks)* Well, bring it on, I say. If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get! *Tiocfaidh ár lá! (pronounced Chooky ar lar)*

**CUT BACK TO (Lydia):**

**REPORTER:**

Minister Skidaway, Will funding for the tertiary sector depend on meeting minimum standards? Could a university lose its funding if it doesn't meet these standards? Are reputations at stake? Isn't this going to put a lot of pressure on universities?

**Lydia:**

Let me be clear on this. Transparency *does* place pressure on people and institutions. Pressure to improve, that's a good kind of pressure. In the classrooms of this country and the university lecture theatres of this country, every day teachers and lecturers say to students – strive to do better, come tomorrow ready to do better. Well, we want to take that same ethos and apply it right throughout education, including to universities.

**REPORTER:**

But Minister Skidaway, who decides on what these minimum academic standards will be? How will they be measured and assessed? How will comparability across universities be managed on the national scale?

**Lydia:**

These are all excellent questions and I have every confidence that the soon-to-be-established Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority – or TEQSA for short – will develop these guidelines for assessing standards in due course.

**CUT TO:**

**(CAPTION): Trevor Sykes:** *Vice-President, Australasian Association of Leisure, Recreation and Tourism (AALeRT)*

Come in – sorry – I’m just off the plane – just got back from our annual conference. One of them cruises. Down the Rhine. Very nice actually. You know – scenic. Bloody hard work but...

So what was it – standards. Well ... we’ve already got standards – whaddya wanna re-invent the wheel for? I mean, my association - AALeRT - is a fully paid-up member of the International Network of Leisure Providers. We already have international standards of accreditation. And the authority to confer that is very bloody hard to come by, and frankly, it’s very bloody prestigious. And our processes are very bloody rigorous, I assure you....

Look, academic standards have to reflect the real standards required in the professions. Yeah? That’s why we work, in partnership with the tertiary sector, actually looking at student work, making sure that university graduates are work-ready and good to go. Plus we already have the AQF standards don’t we.

I mean, seriously, where are we going with this? Bloody Bloom’s taxidermy and all that I spose. And what is a “threshold standard” anyway – please don’t tell me it’s

the *ability to work in teams*. Or *familiarity with basic processes and procedures*. Or *sound communication skills*. I mean, please, gimme a break....

**CUT BACK TO:**

**Lydia:**

Now, I do have a Cabinet commitment, ladies and gentlemen, but I would like to conclude my remarks by announcing the launch next week of the new My University website. Is the My University website a major undertaking for this government? Yes, let me be clear about this, the My University website *is* a major undertaking for this government. But we believe it will become the gold standard for informed choice amongst our national student cohort and their families. It will showcase the institutional quality and learning outcomes of Australia's higher education providers – and it will provide a big incentive for some universities to improve the quality of the courses they offer.

**REPORTER:**

Isn't that just another league table?

**Lydia:**

Thank you.

**CUT TO:**

**(CAPTION): A/Prof Roly Makepeace:** *Assistant Dean (T&L), Faculty of Professional Communication, NUTS*

**Roly:**

As far as I'm concerned, this whole exercise is missing the point. What we need is a rigorous system of testing academic *achievement*, but achievement is not the focus of the current standards debate. What we're really talking about here is a whole set of TAFE-type competency standards. The problem is – you can't *write* standards. Without a context, you can't have faith in any generic statement of standards. All you get is a form of words that could apply to maths, nutrition, archaeology – you name it.

What we need is - evidence. You have to start with the student's work, and have structured, informed conversations about standards of achievement, based on the primary data.

Our grading system has to tell a real story – the problem in Australia is that the value of a grade is dependent upon its relative scarcity. There's no objective measure of achievement that is reliable, and consistent, and which can be compared across disciplines.

And where is the quality control? That can only be provided by professional accreditation bodies who actually review students' work. If standards aren't industry-linked and industry-tested – what's the point of having them?

***CUT BACK TO:***

**Lydia** (walking off, calling back over her shoulder):

Not a league table ... no, absolutely not ... this is about transparency and informed choice ....

**CODA: TWO STUDENTS – WATCH THE END OF THE NEWS REPORT AND  
TURN OFF TELE – RETURN TO WORK ON THEIR LAPTOPS:**

S1: What's that? Are you filling out your Student Evaluation?

S2: (Laughing): No I haven't done one of those since I started. No I'm doing that exit test ... you know ... we got an email about it.

S1: Oh that ... the standards thingy ... do we have to do that do we? I deleted mine.

S2: Yes we have to do it! We have to pass it before we can graduate. But don't worry. It's multiple choice. It's sooooo easy ....

***FADE OUT***